THE TEMPTING OF TAVERNAKE

A TALE OF LOVE, MYSTERY AND INTRIGUE

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

"SO YOU THINK I AM AN ADVENTURESS," SHE MURMURED

CHAPTER I.

DESPAIR AND INTEREST.

They stood upon the roof of a London boarding-house in the neighborhood of Russell Square—one of those grim shelters, the refuge of Transatlantic curiosity and British penury. The girl—she represented the former race—was leaning against the frail palisading, with gloomy expression and eyes set as though in fixed contemplation of the uninspiring panorama. The young man—unmistakably, uncompromisingly English—stood with his back to the chimney a few feet away, watching his companion. The silence between them was as yet unbroken, had lasted, indeed, since she had stolen away from the shabby drawing-room below, where a florid lady with a raucous voice had been shouting a music-hall ditty. Close upon her heels, but without speech of any sort, he had followed. They were almost strangers, except for the occasional word or two of greeting which the etiquette of the establishment demanded. Yet she had accepted his espionage without any protest by word or look. He had followed her with a very definite object. Had she surmised it, he wondered? She had not turned her head or vouchsafed even a single question or remark to him since he had pushed his way through the trap-door almost at her heels and stepped out on to the leads. Yet it seemed to him that she must guess.

Below them, what seemed to be the phantasm of a painted city, a wilderness of housetops, of smoke-wreathed spires and chimneys, stretched away to a murky, blood-red horizon. Even as they stood there, a deeper color stained the sky, an angry sun began to sink into the piled up masses of thick, vaporous clouds. The girl watched with an air of sullen yet absorbed interest. Her companion's eyes were still fixed wholly and critically upon her. Who was she, he wondered? Why had she left her own country to come to a city where she seemed to have no friends, no manner of interest? In that caravansary of the world's stricken ones she had been an almost unnoticed figure, silent, indisposed for conversation, not in any obvious manner attractive. Her clothes, notwithstanding their air of having come from a first-class dressmaker, were shabby and out of fashion, their extreme neatness in itself pathetic. She was thin, yet not without a certain buoyant lightness of movement always at variance with her tired eyes, her ceaseless air of dejection. And withal she was a rebel. It was written in her attitude, it was evident in her lowering militant expression, the smouldering fire in her eyes proclaimed it. Her long, rather narrow face was gripped between her hands; her elbows rested upon the brick parapet. She gazed at that world of blood-red mists, of unshapely, grotesque buildings, of strange, tawdry colors; she listened to the medley of sounds—crude, shrill, insistent, something like the groaning of a world stripped naked—and she had all the time the air of one who hates the thing she looks upon.

Tavernake, whose curiosity concerning his companion remained unappeased, decided that the moment for speech had arrived. He took a step forward upon the soft, pulpy leads. Even then he hesitated before he finally committed himself. About his appearance little was remarkable save the general air of determination which gave character to his undistinguished features. He was something above the medium height, broad-set, and with rather more thick black hair than he knew how to arrange advantageously. He wore a shirt which was somewhat frayed, and an indifferent tie; his boots were heavy and clumsy; he wore also a suit of ready-made clothes with the air of one who knew that they were ready-made and was satisfied with them. People of a nervous or sensitive disposition would, without doubt, have found him irritating but for a certain nameless gift—an almost Napoleonic concentration upon the things of the passing moment, which was in itself impressive and which somehow disarmed criticism.

"About that bracelet!" he said at last.

She moved her head and looked at him. A young man of less assurance would have turned and fled. Not so Tavernake. Once sure of his ground he was immovable. There was murder in her eyes but he was not even disturbed.

"I saw you take it from the little table by the piano, you know," he continued. "It was rather a rash thing to do. Mrs. Fitzgerald was looking for it before I reached the stairs. I expect she has called the police in by now."

Slowly her hand stole into the depths of her pocket and emerged. Something flashed for a moment high over her head. The young man caught her wrist just in time, caught it in a veritable grip of iron. Then, indeed, the evil fires flashed from her eyes, her teeth gleamed white, her bosom rose and fell in a storm of angry, unmuttered sobs. She was dry-eyed and still speechless, but for all that she was a tigress. A strangely-cut silhouette they formed there upon the housetops, with a background of empty sky, their feet sinking in the warm leads.

"I think I had better take it," he said. "Let go."

Her fingers yielded the bracelet—a tawdry, ill-designed affair of rubies and diamonds. He looked at it disapprovingly.

"That's an ugly thing to go to prison for," he remarked, slipping it into his pocket. "It was a stupid thing to do, anyhow, you know. You couldn't have got away with it—unless," he added, looking over the parapet as though struck with a sudden idea, "unless you had a confederate below."

He heard the rush of her skirts and he was only just in time. Nothing, in fact, but a considerable amount of presence of mind and the full exercise of a strength which was continually providing surprises for his acquaintances, was sufficient to save her. Their struggles upon the very edge of the roof dislodged a brick from the palisading, which went tumbling down into the street. They both paused to watch it, his arms still gripping her and one foot pressed against an iron rod. It was immediately after they had seen it pitch harmlessly into the road that a new sensation came to this dramatic young man. For the first time in his life, he realized that it was possible to feel a certain pleasurable emotion in the close grasp of a being of the opposite sex. Consequently, although she had now ceased to struggle, he kept his arms locked around her, looking into her face with an interest intense enough, but more analytical than emotional, as though seeking to discover the meaning of this curious throbbing of his pulses. She herself, as though exhausted, remained quite passive, shivering a little in the keen air and breathing like a hunted animal whose last hour has come. Their eyes met; then she tore herself away.

"You are a hateful person," she said deliberately, "a hateful, interfering person. I detest you."

"I think that we will go down now," he replied.

He raised the trap-door and glanced at her significantly. She held her skirts closely together and passed through it without looking at him. She stepped lightly down the ladder and without hesitation descended also a flight of uncarpeted attic stairs. Here, however, upon the landing, she awaited him with obvious reluctance.

"Are you going to send for the police?" she asked without looking at him.

"No," he answered.

"Why not?"

"If I had meant to give you away I should have told Mrs. Fitzgerald at once that I had seen you take her bracelet, instead of following you out on to the roof."

"Do you mind telling me what you do propose to do, then?" she continued still without looking at him, still without the slightest note of appeal in her tone.

He withdrew the bracelet from his pocket and balanced it upon his finger.

"I am going to say that I took it for a joke," he declared.

She hesitated.

"Mrs. Fitzgerald's sense of humor is not elastic," she warned him.

"She will be very angry, of course," he assented, "but she will not believe that I meant to steal it."

The girl moved slowly a few steps away.

"I suppose that I ought to thank you," she said, still with averted face and sullen manner. "You have really been very decent. I am much obliged."

"Are you not coming down?" he asked.

"Not at present," she answered. "I am going to my room."

He looked around the landing on which they stood, at the miserable, uncarpeted floor, the ill-painted doors on which the long-forgotten varnish stood out in blisters, the jumble of dilapidated hot-water cans, a mop, and a medley of brooms and rags all thrown down together in a corner.

"But these are the servants' quarters, surely," he remarked.

"They are good enough for me; my room is here," she told him, turning the handle of one of the doors and disappearing. The prompt turning of the key sounded, he thought, a little ungracious.

With the bracelet in his hand, Tavernake descended three more flights of stairs and entered the drawing-room of the private hotel conducted by Mrs. Raithby Lawrence, whose husband, one learned from her frequent reiteration of the fact, had once occupied a distinguished post in the Merchant Service of his country. The disturbance following upon the disappearance of the bracelet was evidently at its height. There were at least a dozen people in the room, most of whom were standing up. The central figure of them all was Mrs. Fitzgerald, large and florid, whose yellow hair with its varied shades frankly admitted its indebtedness to peroxide; a lady of the dashing type, who had once made her mark in the music-halls, but was now happily married to a commercial traveler who was seldom visible. Mrs. Fitzgerald was talking.

"In respectable boarding-houses, Mrs. Lawrence," she declared with great emphasis, "thefts sometimes take place, I will admit, in the servants' quarters, and with all their temptations, poor things, it's not so much to be wondered at. But no such thing as this has ever happened to me before—to have jewelry taken almost from my person in the drawing-room of what should be a well-conducted establishment. Not a servant in the room, remember, from the moment I took it off until I got up from the piano and found it missing. It's your guests you've got to look after, Mrs. Lawrence, sorry to say it though I am."

Mrs. Lawrence managed here, through sheer loss of breath on the part of her assailant, to interpose a tearful protest.

"I am quite sure," she protested feebly, "that there is not a person in this house who would dream of stealing anything, however valuable it was. I am most particular always about references."

"Valuable, indeed!" Mrs. Fitzgerald continued with increased volubility. "I'd have you understand that I am not one of those who wear trumpery jewelry. Thirty-five guineas that bracelet cost me if it cost a penny, and if my husband were only at home I could show you the receipt."

Then there came an interruption of almost tragical interest. Mrs. Fitzgerald, her mouth still open, her stream of eloquence suddenly arrested, stood with her artificially darkened eyes riveted upon the stolid, self-composed figure in the doorway. Every one else was gazing in the same direction. Tavernake was holding the bracelet in the palm of his hand.

"Thirty-five guineas!" he repeated. "If I had known that it was worth as much as that, I do not think that I should have dared to touch it."

"You—you took it!" Mrs. Fitzgerald gasped.

"I am afraid," he admitted, "that it was rather a clumsy joke. I apologize, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I hope you did not really imagine that it had been stolen."

One was conscious of the little thrill of emotion which marked the termination of the episode. Most of the people not directly concerned were disappointed; they were being robbed of their excitement, their hopes of a tragical denouement were frustrated. Mrs. Lawrence's worn face plainly showed her relief. The lady with the yellow hair, on the other hand, who had now succeeded in working herself up into a towering rage, snatched the bracelet from the young man's fingers and with a purple flush in her cheeks was obviously struggling with an intense desire to box his ears.

"That's not good enough for a tale!" she exclaimed harshly. "I tell you I don't believe a word of it. Took it for a joke, indeed! I only wish my husband were here; he'd know what to do."

"Your husband couldn't do much more than get your bracelet back, ma'am," Mrs. Lawrence replied with acerbity. "Such a fuss and calling every one thieves, too! I'd be ashamed to be so suspicious."

Mrs. Fitzgerald glared haughtily at her hostess.

"It's all very well for those that don't possess any jewelry and don't know the value of it, to talk," she declared, with her eyes fixed upon a black jet ornament which hung from the other woman's neck. "What I say is this, and you may just as well hear it from me now as later. I don't believe this cock-and-bull story of Mr. Tavernake's. Them as took my bracelet from that table meant keeping it, only they hadn't the courage. And I'm not referring to you, Mr. Tavernake," the lady continued vigorously, "because I don't believe you took it, for all your talk about a joke. And whom you may be shielding it wouldn't take me two guesses to name, and your motive must be clear to every one. The common hussy!"

"You are exciting yourself unnecessarily, Mrs. Fitzgerald," Tavernake remarked. "Let me assure you that it was I who took your bracelet from that table."

Mrs. Fitzgerald regarded him scornfully.

"Do you expect me to believe a tale like that?" she demanded.

"Why not?" Tavernake replied. "It is the truth. I am sorry that you have been so upset—"

"It is not the truth!"

Mere sensation! Another unexpected entrance! Once more interest in the affair was revived. After all, the lookers-on felt that they were not to be robbed of their tragedy. An old lady with yellow cheeks and jet black eyes leaned forward with her hand to her ear, anxious not to miss a syllable of what was coming. Tavernake bit his lip; it was the girl from the roof who had entered the room.

"I have no doubt," she continued in a cool, clear tone, "That Mrs. Fitzgerald's first guess would have been correct. I took the bracelet. I did not take it for a joke, I did not take it because I admire it—I think it is hideously ugly. I took it because I had no money."

She paused and looked around at them all, quietly, yet with something in her face from which they all shrank. She stood where the light fell full upon her shabby black gown and dejected-looking hat. The hollows in her pale cheeks, and the faint rims under her eyes, were clearly manifest; but notwithstanding her fragile appearance, she held herself with composure and even dignity. Twenty—thirty seconds must have passed whilst she stood there, slowly finishing the buttoning of her gloves. No one attempted to break the silence. She dominated them all—they felt that she had something more to say. Even Mrs. Fitzgerald felt a weight upon her tongue.

"It was a clumsy attempt," she went on. "I should have had no idea where to raise money upon the thing, but I apologize to you, nevertheless, Mrs. Fitzgerald, for the anxiety which my removal of your valuable property must have caused you," she added, turning to the owner of the bracelet, whose cheeks were once more hot with anger at the contempt in the girl's tone. "I suppose I ought to thank you, Mr. Tavernake, also, for your well-meant effort to preserve my character. In future, that shall be my sole charge. Has any one anything more to say to me before I go?"

Somehow or other, no one had. Mrs. Fitzgerald was irritated and fuming, but she contented herself with a snort. Her speech was ready enough as a rule, but there was a look in this girl's eyes from which she was glad enough to turn away. Mrs. Lawrence made a weak attempt at a farewell.

"I am sure," she began, "we are all sorry for what's occurred and that she must go—not that perhaps it isn't better, under the circumstances," she added hastily. "As regards—"

"There is nothing owing to you," the girl interrupted calmly. "You may congratulate yourself upon that, for if there were you would not get it. Nor have I stolen anything else."

"About your luggage?" Mrs. Lawrence asked.

"When I need it, I will send for it," the girl replied.

She turned her back upon them and before they realized it she was gone. She had, indeed, something of the grand manner. She had come to plead guilty to a theft and she had left them all feeling a little like snubbed children. Mrs. Fitzgerald, as soon as the spell of the girl's presence was removed, was one of the first to recover herself. She felt herself beginning to grow hot with renewed indignation.

"A thief!" she exclaimed looking around the room. "Just an ordinary self-convicted thief! That's what I call her, and nothing else. And here we all stood like a lot of ninnies. Why, if I'd done my duty I'd have locked the door and sent for a policeman!"

"Too late now, anyway," Mrs. Lawrence declared. "She's gone for good, and no mistake. Walked right out of the house. I heard her slam the front door."

"And a good job, too," Mrs. Fitzgerald affirmed. "We don't want any of her sort here—not those who've got things of value about them. I bet she didn't leave America for nothing."

A little gray-haired lady, who had not as yet spoken, and who very seldom took part in any discussion at all, looked up from her knitting. She was desperately poor but she had charitable instincts.

"I wonder what made her want to steal," she remarked quietly.

"A born thief," Mrs. Fitzgerald declared with conviction,—"a real bad lot. One of your sly-looking ones, I call her."

The little lady sighed.

"When I was better off," she continued, "I used to help at a soup kitchen in Poplar. I have never forgotten a certain look we used to see occasionally in the faces of some of the men and women. I found out what it meant—it was hunger. Once or twice lately I have passed the girl who has just gone out, upon the stairs, and she almost frightened me. She had just the same look in her eyes. I noticed yesterday—it was just before dinner, too—but she never came down."

"She paid so much for her room and extra for meals," Mrs. Lawrence said thoughtfully. "She never would have a meal unless she paid for it at the time. To tell you the truth, I was feeling a bit uneasy about her. She hasn't been in the dining-room for two days, and from what they tell me there's no signs of her having eaten anything in her room. As for getting anything out, why should she? It would be cheaper for her here than anywhere, if she'd got any money at all."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The little old lady with the knitting looked down the street into the sultry darkness which had swallowed up the girl.

"I wonder whether Mr. Tavernake knows anything about her," some one suggested.

But Tavernake was not in the room.

CHAPTER II.

A TETE-A-TETE SUPPER.

Tavernake caught her up in New Oxford Street and fell at once into step with her. He wasted no time whatever upon preliminaries.

"I should be glad," he said, "if you would tell me your name."

Her first glance at him was fierce enough to have terrified a different sort of man. Upon Tavernake it had absolutely no effect.

"You need not unless you like, of course," he went on, "but I wish to talk to you for a few moments and I thought that it would be more convenient if I addressed you by name. I do not remember to have heard it mentioned at Bleuheim House, and Mrs. Lawrence, as you know, does not introduce her guests."

By this time they had walked a score or so of paces together. The girl, after her first furious glance, had taken absolutely no notice of him except to quicken her pace a little. Tavernake remained by her side, however, showing not the slightest sense of embarrassment or annoyance. He seemed perfectly content to wait and he had not in the least the appearance of a man who could be easily shaken off. From a fit of furious anger she passed suddenly and without warning to a state of half hysterical amusement.

"You are a foolish, absurd person," she declared. "Please go away. I do not wish you to walk with me."

Tavernake remained imperturbable. She remembered suddenly his intervention on her behalf.

"If you insist upon knowing," she said, "my name at Bleuheim House was Beatrice Burnay. I am much obliged to you for what you did for me there, but that is finished. I do not wish to have any conversation with you, and I absolutely object to your company. Please leave me at once."

"I am sorry," he answered, "but that is not possible."

"Not possible?" she repeated, wonderingly.

He shook his head.

"You have no money, you have eaten no dinner, and I do not believe that you have any idea where you are going," he declared, deliberately.

Her face was once more dark with anger.

"Even if that were the truth," she insisted, "tell me what concern it is of yours? Your reminding me of these facts is simply an impertinence."

"I am sorry that you look upon it in that light," he remarked, still without the least sign of discomposure. "We will, if you do not mind, waive the discussion for the moment. Do you prefer a small restaurant or a corner in a big one? There is music at Frascati's but there are not so many people in the smaller ones."

She turned half around upon the pavement and looked at him steadfastly. His personality was at last beginning to interest her. His square jaw and measured speech were indices of a character at least unusual. She recognized certain invincible qualities under an exterior absolutely commonplace.

"Are you as persistent about everything in life?" she asked him.

"Why not?" he replied. "I try always to be consistent."

"What is your name?"

"Leonard Tavernake," he answered, promptly.

"Are you well off—I mean moderately well off?"

"I have quite a sufficient income."

"Have you any one dependent upon you?"

"Not a soul," he declared. "I am my own master in every sense of the word."

She laughed in an odd sort of way.

"Then you shall pay for your persistence," she said—"I mean that I may as well rob you of a sovereign as the restaurant people."

"You must tell me now where you would like to go to," he insisted. "It is getting late."

"I do not like these foreign places," she replied. "I should prefer to go to the grill-room of a good restaurant."

"We will take a taxicab," he announced. "You have no objection?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"If you have the money and don't mind spending it," she said, "I will admit that I have had all the walking I want. Besides, the toe of my boot is worn through and I find it painful. Yesterday I tramped ten miles trying to find a man who was getting up a concert party for the provinces."

"And did you find him?" he asked, hailing a cab.

"Yes, I found him," she answered, indifferently. "We went through the usual programme. He heard me sing, tried to kiss me and promised to let me know. Nobody ever refuses anything in my profession, you see. They promise to let you know."

"Are you a singer, then, or an actress?"

"I am neither," she told him. "I said 'my profession' because it is the only one to which I have ever tried to belong. I have never succeeded in obtaining an engagement in this country. I do not suppose that even if I had persevered I should ever have had one."

"You have given up the idea, then," he remarked.

"I have given it up," she admitted, a little curtly. "Please do not think, because I am allowing you to be my companion for a short time, that you may ask me questions. How fast these taxies go!"

They drew up at their destination—a well-known restaurant in Regent Street. He paid the cabman and they descended a flight of stairs into the grill-room.

"I hope that this place will suit you," he said. "I have not much experience of restaurants."

She looked around and nodded.

"Yes," she replied, "I think that it will do."

She was very shabbily dressed, and he, although his appearance was by no means ordinary, was certainly not of the type which inspires immediate respect in even the grill-room of a fashionable restaurant. Nevertheless, they received prompt and almost officious service. Tavernake, as he watched his companion's air, her manner of seating herself and accepting the attentions of the head waiter, felt that nameless impulse which was responsible for his having followed her from Bleuheim House and which he could only call curiosity, becoming stronger. An exceedingly matter-of-fact person, he was also by instinct and habit observant. He never doubted but that she belonged to a class of society from which the guests at the boarding-house where they had both lived were seldom recruited, and of which he himself knew little. He was not in the least a snob, this young man, but he found the fact interesting. Life with him was already very much the same as a ledger account—a matter of debits and credits, and he had never failed to include among the latter that curious gift of breeding for which he himself, denied it by heritage, had somehow substituted a complete and exceedingly rare naturalness.

"I should like," she announced, laying down the carte, "a fried sole, some cutlets, an ice, and black coffee."

The waiter bowed.

"And for Monsieur?"

Tavernake glanced at his watch; it was already ten o'clock.

"I will take the same," he declared.

"And to drink?"

She seemed indifferent.

"Any white wine," she answered, carelessly, "white or red."

Tavernake took up the wine list and ordered sauterne. They were left alone in their corner for a few minutes, almost the only occupants of the place.

"You are sure that you can afford this?" she asked, looking at him critically. "It may cost you a sovereign or thirty shillings."

He studied the prices on the menu.

"I can afford it quite well and I have plenty of money with me," he assured her, "but I do not think that it will cost more than eighteen shillings. While we are waiting for the sole, shall we talk? I can tell you, if you choose to hear, why I followed you from the boarding-house."

"I don't mind listening to you," she told him, "or I will talk with you about anything you like. There is only one subject which I cannot discuss: that subject is myself and my own doings."

Tavernake was silent for a moment.

"That makes conversation a bit difficult," he remarked.

She leaned back in her chair.

"After this evening," she said, "I go out of your life as completely and finally as though I had never existed. I have a fancy to take my poor secrets with me. If you wish to talk, tell me about yourself. You have gone out of your way to be kind to me. I wonder why. It doesn't seem to be your role."

He smiled slowly. His face was fashioned upon broad lines and the relaxing of his lips lightened it wonderfully. He had good teeth, clear gray eyes, and coarse black hair which he wore a trifle long; his forehead was too massive for good looks.

"No," he admitted, "I do not think that benevolence is one of my characteristics."

Her dark eyes were turned full upon him; her red lips, redder than ever they seemed against the pallor of her cheeks and her deep brown hair, curled slightly. There was something almost insolent in her tone.

"You understand, I hope," she continued, "that you have nothing whatever to look for from me in return for this sum which you propose to expend for my entertainment?"

"I understand that," he replied.

"Not even gratitude," she persisted. "I really do not feel grateful to you. You are probably doing this to gratify some selfish interest or curiosity. I warn you that I am quite incapable of any of the proper sentiments of life."

"Your gratitude would be of no value to me whatever," he assured her.

She was still not wholly satisfied. His complete stolidity frustrated every effort she made to penetrate beneath the surface.

"If I believed," she went on, "that you were one of those men—the world is full of them, you know—who will help a woman with a reasonable appearance so long as it does not seriously interfere with their own comfort—"

"Our sex has nothing whatever to do with it," he interrupted. "As to your appearance, I have not even considered it. I could not tell you whether you are beautiful or ugly—I am no judge of these matters. What I have done, I have done because it pleased me to do it."

"Do you always do what pleases you?" she asked.

"Nearly always."

She looked him over again attentively, with an interest obviously impersonal, a trifle supercilious.

"I suppose," she remarked, "you consider yourself one of the strong people of the world?"

"I do not know about that," he answered. "I do not often think about myself."

"I mean," she explained, "that you are one of those people who struggle hard to get just what they want in life."

His jaw suddenly tightened and she saw the likeness to Napoleon.

"I do more than struggle," he affirmed. "I succeed. If I make up my mind to do a thing, I do it. If I make up my mind to get a thing I get it. It means hard work sometimes, but that is all."

For the first time, a really natural interest shone out of her eyes. The half sulky contempt with which she had received his advances passed away. She became at that moment a human being, self-forgetting, the heritage of her charms—for she really had a curious but very poignant attractiveness—suddenly evident. It was only a momentary lapse and it was entirely wasted. Not even one of the waiters happened to be looking that way, and Tavernake was thinking wholly of himself.

"It is a good deal to say—that," she remarked, reflectively.

"It is a good deal but it is not too much," he declared. "Every man who takes life seriously should say it."

Then she laughed—actually laughed—and he had a vision of flashing white teeth, of a mouth breaking into pleasant curves, of dark mirth-lit eyes, lustreless no longer, provocative, inspiring. A vague impression as of something pleasant warmed his blood. It was a rare thing for him to be so stirred, but even then it was not sufficient to disturb the focus of his thoughts.

"Tell me," she demanded, "what do you do? What is your profession or work?"

"I am with a firm of auctioneers and estate agents," he answered readily,—"Messrs. Dowling, Spence & Company the name is. Our offices are in Waterloo Place."

"You find it interesting?"

"Of course," he answered. "Interesting? Why not? I work at it."

"Are you a partner?"

"No," he admitted. "Six years ago I was a carpenter; then I became an errand boy in Mr. Dowling's office—I had to learn the business, you see. Today I am a sort of manager. In eighteen months' time—perhaps before that if they do not offer me a partnership—I shall start for myself."

Once more the subtlest of smiles flickered at the corners of her lips.

"Do they know yet?" she asked, with faint irony.

"Not yet," he replied, with absolute seriousness. "They might tell me to go, and I have a few things to learn yet. I would rather make experiments for some one else than for myself. I can use the results later; they will help me to make money."

She laughed softly and wiped the tears out of her eyes. They were really very beautiful eyes notwithstanding the dark rims encircling them.

"If only I had met you before!" she murmured.

"Why?" he asked.

"Don't ask me," she begged. "It would not be good for your conceit, if you have any, to tell you."

"I have no conceit and I am not inquisitive," he said, "but I do not see why you laughed."

This period of waiting came to an end at this point. The fish was brought and their conversation became disjointed. In the silence which followed, the old shadow crept over her face. Once only it lifted. It was while they were waiting for the cutlets. She leaned towards him, her elbows upon the tablecloth, her face supported by her fingers.

"I think that it is time we left these generalities," she insisted, "and you told me something rather more personal, something which I am very anxious to know. Tell me exactly why so self-centered a person as yourself should interest himself in a fellow-creature at all. It seems odd to me."

"It is odd," he admitted, frankly. "I will try to explain it to you but it will sound very bald, and I do not think that you will understand. I watched you a few nights ago out on the roof at Bleuheim House. You were looking across the house-tops and you didn't seem to be seeing anything at all really, and yet all the time I knew that you were seeing things I couldn't, you were understanding and appreciating something which I knew nothing of, and it worried me. I tried to talk to you that evening, but you were rude."

"You really are a curious person," she remarked. "Are you always worried, then, if you find that some one else is seeing things or understanding things which are outside your comprehension?"

"Always," he replied promptly.

"You are too far-reaching," she affirmed. "You want to gather everything into your life. You cannot. You will only be unhappy if you try. No man can do it. You must learn your limitations or suffer all your days."

"Limitations!" He repeated the words with measureless scorn. "If I learn them at all," he declared, with unexpected force, "it will be with scars and bruises, for nothing else will content me."

"We are, I should say, almost the same age," she remarked slowly.

"I am twenty-five," he told her.

"I am twenty-two," she said. "It seems strange that two people whose ideas of life are as far apart as the Poles should have come together like this even for a moment. I do not understand it at all. Did you expect that I should tell you just what I saw in the clouds that night?"

"No," he answered, "not exactly. I have spoken of my first interest in you only. There are other things. I told a lie about the bracelet and I followed you out of the boarding-house and I brought you here, for some other—for quite a different reason."

"Tell me what it was," she demanded.

"I do not know it myself," he declared solemnly. "I really and honestly do not know it. It is because I hoped that it might come to me while we were together, that I am here with you at this moment. I do not like impulses which I do not understand."

She laughed at him a little scornfully.

"After all," she said, "although it may not have dawned upon you yet, it is probably the same wretched reason. You are a man and you have the poison somewhere in your blood. I am not really bad-looking, you know."

He looked at her critically. She was a little over-slim, perhaps, but she was certainly wonderfully graceful. Even the poise of her head, the manner in which she leaned back in her chair, had its individuality. Her features, too, were good, though her mouth had grown a trifle hard. For the first time the dead pallor of her cheeks was relieved by a touch of color. Even Tavernake realized that there were great possibilities about her. Nevertheless, he shook his head.

"I do not agree with you in the least," he asserted firmly. "Your looks have nothing to do with it. I am sure that it is not that."

"Let me cross-examine you," she suggested. "Think carefully now. Does it give you no pleasure at all to be sitting here alone with me?"

He answered her deliberately: it was obvious that he was speaking the truth.

"I am not conscious that it does," he declared. "The only feeling I am aware of at the present moment in connection with you, is the curiosity of which I have already spoken."

She leaned a little towards him, extending her very shapely fingers. Once more the smile at her lips transformed her face.

"Look at my hand," she said. "Tell me—would you like to hold it just for a minute, if I gave it you?"

Her eyes challenged his, softly and yet imperiously. His whole attention, however, seemed to be absorbed by her finger-nails. It seemed strange to him that a girl in her straits should have devoted so much care to her hands.

"No," he answered deliberately, "I have no wish to hold your hand. Why should I?"

"Look at me," she insisted.

He did so without embarrassment or hesitation—it was more than ever apparent that he was entirely truthful. She leaned back in her chair, laughing softly to herself.

Continued in Monday's Evening Ledger.